

BAND OF OHIO FIREBUGS BROUGHT TO JUSTICE

HAVE TERRORIZED A PORTION OF THE
STATE FOR LAST THIRTY YEARS.

MANY PROMINENT MEN ARE INVOLVED

State Officials Were Baffled Until They Se-
cured the Confession of Eighty-Year-Old
Jack Page, After Which Indict-
ments Followed Rapidly.

History of This Remarkable Band of Incendiaries
and Their Methods of Operation—Boldness Marked
Every Move—A Desire for Revenge on the Part
of Page Finally Caused Their Exposure.

Toledo.—Northwestern Ohio, with its pretty farms and prosperous landowners, is nearing the end of a reign of terror of 30 years, during which time a gang of incendiaries, hungry for sudden wealth, have desecrated its beauty with flaming torches, and committed almost every crime on the calendar, from the smallest burglary to attempted murder.

Criminal history tells no story of events so blood-curdling as those which have shocked the residents of this section in the last quarter century. The wildest dime-novel dreamer could hardly imagine so terrible a melodrama as has been acted by this conspiracy of mercenary firebugs. Revelations made in the past few weeks, by confession, and investigation by state officers, are so startling as to be almost unbelievable. Against one man have been returned 12 indictments, against another there are ten and lucky indeed is the member of the organization who escaped with only a single true bill, for the work of the state has been thorough and the law's firm hand has been laid with unrelenting vigor on those known to be connected with the organization.

Only a Beginning.
With the 40 or more indictments, however, it is believed that only a good beginning has been made. Deep under the surface, it is known that more disclosures still more startling, are to come. Those men effected by investigation now completed, fully conscious that their long terms in prison will effectually prevent them from participation in more work, have shown a disposition to tell at least some of the secrets, and, with the aid of these admissions, Williams and Fulton counties, where the more exciting events have transpired, are determined to punish all the guilty, and remove the stain of dishonor which has been made upon them by their tardiness in ferreting out the criminals.

Thirty years ago, Jack Page, one of the most daring and notorious of the

night. A dual existence it was, with church worship an outward sign of the piety in their bosoms. Nothing escaped. Schoolhouses were fired with impunity, just as willingly as were farmhouses; stores and barns made the objects of their incendiaryism, for one class of timber made as pretty a flame as another.

Made Arson a Business.

As far as known, only one of the band made arson a business, just to see things burn. This was Freddy Bowman, a genuine pyromaniac, whose lust for adventure induced him to set fire to the Methodist church in Stryker, O. From a small shed nearby he watched the flames devour the small structure. Taken in because he was young and precocious, he was entrusted with small jobs, where the risk of detection was not great, and where he would be given opportunity to become proficient in the art, and ultimately develop into a talented firebug. One night, without orders from his superiors, he touched off the church, and his subsequent apprehension and confession almost ensnared the remainder of the gang. But, so high in the community did the ringleaders stand, the admissions of the youth were pronounced falsehoods, and nobody but the officers placed faith in them. Not until within the last year, when the boy's confession was substantiated, did it become public that his arrest was one of the first of an organization of men who allowed the commission of no crime, however enormous, to stand between them and the money they coveted.

The traveler unacquainted with the happenings of past years would see little in the seared country nowadays to attract his attention. The fire-damaged buildings have been replaced with new structures and, under the protection of the state fire marshal, protection has been given sufficiently to allow improvements. But the time was when every man, woman and child stood in mortal fear of the gang. One man could hardly speak confidentially to his

lect only after the greatest efforts. Now and then, indications would appear on the surface of what was really happening, and it was from these small clues that the detectives finally unearthed the chief conspirators and turned them over to the law for punishment.

Of this gang of fearless criminals, Homer Morrison, once a respected son of well-to-do parents, was the leader. His cunning brain devised most of the daring jobs during the long years he and his pals worked, unmolested, burning any building for which the owner paid the required fee. Once a man employed the arsonists to transact business, he was in their meshes, for, if he was not aware that he was just as liable to punishment as if he had applied the torch, he was so informed, and thus became an addition to the ranks.

The Killing of Ayers.

It was Morrison's avarice that resulted in the concoction of a plot to kill Samuel Ayers, November 27, 1897. Ayers was a wealthy cattleman, who lived near West Unity, a small village in Williams county. The old fellow was peculiar, believed everybody his friend, and feared harm from no one. Every Friday, as regularly as that day

people of the town, and in a moment or two several were hurrying to the scene.

Flight of the Murderer.

Ayers had fallen in such a manner that his wallet, filled with bills, could not be reached and Ely was obliged to scud away in the darkness, leaving the prostrate body of Ayers to be found by the villagers. Hastening to Morrison's barn he found that arsonist beside himself with rage.

"Why did you shoot? Why didn't you belt him over the head?" he asked Ely.

"Shut up, you fool, I had to shoot or he would have got me," Ely replied, coolly; "and what's worse, I didn't have time to get the money."

Morrison, cowardly even in crime, wanted to leave Ely to his own fate. The Kansas City crook, however, was too old at the business. "You got me into it, now get me out, or there'll be somebody else beside me sent up for this little job," was his admonition, and it was up to Morrison to furnish the assistance.

With the help of a farm hand who afterwards confessed, Morrison railroaded Ely several miles away, where he was to remain for a week or two, but a posse of indignant citizens



ELY STANDS OFF A POSSE.

came each week, he visited the little bank in the village, drew out from \$1,500 to \$5,000 with which to transact business the week following.

Morrison was Ayers' best friend, to all appearances. One night, Morrison casually asked the cattleman why he never carried a revolver for protection. "What's the use?" Ayers asked. "Nobody knows I have money in my pockets but my friends, and I trust every one of them."

Within a week Morrison, fearing to do the job himself, imported Jim Ely, a Kansas City crook, who was to hold up Ayers and murder him if necessary to get the money. Ely balked on the killing. "I have a brother who will do that; he will be here soon," he told Morrison, and in two days C. Waldo Ely dropped in at West Unity, met Morrison in the latter's barn and the details of the crime were planned. Morrison's scouts watched Ayers, learned that he drew about \$3,000 from the bank, and shadowed his every movement until the time came to strike.

Meanwhile Morrison remained at home, conscious of the fact that half the swag was to be given him, that the division was to be made in his barn, where the plans for the robbery were made, and that Ely was to be "planted" there until he found a good opportunity to escape.

Yet Morrison and the cattle buyer had been life long friends, and Ayers, if he was to choose any one man more friendly to him than another, would have selected Morrison. But Morrison saw his chance and his wicked mind could not be restrained by mere bonds of friendship.

The night of the assault a dismal rain and cutting wind, almost blinding all who chanced to be out, kept nearly everybody in the village indoors. Ayers had played his usual game of cards and was on his way home. Morrison's men spotted him, signalled Ely, who was lying in ambush, and when Ayers came to the designated spot he found two big guns thrust in front of his face.

Ely was behind them, well masked. "Your dough, please," was all the accomplished stick-up man said.

Ayers reached for an old-fashioned Colt revolver that he had, by mere chance, put into his pocket before leaving home. Afterwards he said that Morrison's admonition made him suspicious.

As he pulled the gun there were two sharp reports as streaks of flame poured from the barrels of the guns Ely held. Ayers fell with a groan. The noise of the shooting attracted

pressed too closely on his trail and immediate escape was necessary. Fleeing before the officers and farmers, Ely's escape, as subsequently described by himself, was one so hazardous that he does not to-day know how the shower of bullets sent after him failed to end his life. With the horses pushing him to his utmost he came upon a farmer, driving peacefully along the road. "Stop or I'll shoot," he yelled. The farmer pulled up. Paying no attention to the men following, a quarter of a mile behind, he stood behind the agriculturist and ordered him to drive "like h—, or I'll blow your bloody brains out." Again the farmer obeyed. Suddenly coming upon a dozen ditchmen directly in his path, all hope of escape seemed to be cut off. It was then that the remarkable coolness of the man and presence of mind asserted themselves. Hurriedly jumping from the wagon he cowed the crowd in front with his revolver, calmly unhitched one of the horses and before anybody knew his intentions he had jumped on the animal's back and, with half a dozen shots, dashed on a mad gallop to a stretch of wooded land three miles away. Reaching the thicket he dismounted, turned the horse loose and escaped from his pursuers. It was then that the plans of Morrison to aid in the escape were useful, for Ely found the home of Jack Taylor, one of the gang, gave the password, and was sheltered until he had time to burglarize the residence of William Schwartz, a farmer, and ultimately found his way to Kansas City.

Ely's Confession.

In the investigation of recent years the robbery of Ayers was looked into, and information given by Jack Page resulted in the apprehension of Ely. He was brought to Williams county from his residence in the west, and when the evidence prepared by the state fire marshal was shown him he confessed to the deed, took the officers over the route of his escape and verified all that had been related by Page in his confession. He served one year in the Columbus (O.), penitentiary for his crime, justice having been side-tracked to some extent because he turned state's evidence and supplied the officers with information which, in part, resulted in the arrest and conviction of Morrison, who is now serving a sentence of 30 years in prison.

Jack Page, first in crime after Morrison, enjoys freedom because he gave information of so much value in hunting down the firebugs. A crippled old man now, he does not hesitate to say that he cannot begin to remember how many houses he fired, and how many

dark and stormy nights he left his home, with flaming torches, and sold his manhood and soul for a few paltry dollars, to be gained when the robbed insurance companies paid the policies on the buildings consumed.

At present Page is whiling away his time with a secret service guard constantly watching him, for members of the conspiracy have vowed to take his life for the disclosures he made.

Fire Marshal Takes a Hand.

The first visit to West Unity of Walter Payne, who was, during the investigation, assistant fire marshal, will never be forgotten by him. It was by the slightest chance that he ran into a shred of evidence which, followed up from a hundred different directions, finally brought the hoped-for results. Clyde Persing, of West Unity, was indebted to a Toledo firm in a rather large amount, and, neglecting payment, he was drawn upon. Hecored by the action in presenting a draft to him for payment, Persing lost his temper, and threw care to the winds. At that time he conducted a small restaurant in a building owned by Mrs. Winifred Adolph. The night after the draft came to him the restaurant burned. That was in July of 1902. So bold was the action of the man that it could not fail to arouse the suspicion of Mr. Payne, and, within a few days, he visited the village. He had not been there more than a few minutes before his presence was tipped off to the leaders of the gang. Homer Morrison was there at the time, and his trusty lieutenants made him aware of the fact that the fire marshal was in the village. Payne desired to talk with Frederick Miller, the only banker of the town, and who was the agent for nearly all the insurance companies which had policies placed in the vicinity. The marshal went to the bank, and, to his surprise, the brazen scoundrel actually followed him, in their attempt to learn the exact nature of his business. Even Morrison, fearless because he thought his dignity in the community protected him from suspicion, listened with eagerness to what the marshal said, and then entrusted the work of shadowing Payne to less distinguished men in the profession.

The officer finally succeeded in evading the fellows on his trail, and held a long conference with Miller, and other prominent men, who, he had learned, had suffered because of their honesty in refusing to participate in the depredations. From citizens of this class, he learned much, and his suspicions that the restaurant fire was of an incendiary nature were strengthened.

But, to his great surprise, he was unable to get one of the men assembled there, to mention the name of a single person who might, possibly, be connected. They actually feared the consequences that would come, when it was discovered that they gave information. Appeal to their manliness was unavailing. They were thoroughly cowed by the threats. They feared their lives would be the forfeit for divulging any of their secrets. Payne pointed out the seriousness of the crime of arson, and showed them the criminal statutes, providing imprisonment for 20 years, of convicted firebugs, but they still refused to talk, but related events of the past, and described how the gang had succeeded, even at elections, to poll votes enough to land candidates who would not prosecute them.

Policy of the Citizens.

Such was Payne's first visit to the actual scene of operations. He left, disgusted with the men who posed as representative citizens of the community. But his subsequent visits changed his mind. He understood, after learning all about the manner of men who were doing the dastardly work, why it was policy for law-abiding citizens to keep their mouths closed, when the law offered them so little protection.

That was the proposition to be worked out, and the necessity of keen detective work was at once apparent. With a problem of this magnitude, expenditure of much money is necessary, and when Payne reported his findings and suspicions to the state department in Columbus, it was at once decided that funds should be provided. H. H. Hollenbeck was detailed to assist in the work, and, from Toledo, and Bryan, the work was carried on, not for days, or weeks, or months, but for years.

Jack Page Confesses.

Luck favored the officers. Unfortunately Jack Page—his declining years rendering him unfit for active service—was in the way of the younger members of the gang. They resolved to put him out of the way. Murder was out of the question, so he was hired to burn a barn in Michigan, and Morrison, still possessing the sagacity of his younger years, so arranged things that the officers from Michigan had an easy task to track Page from the barn to his home in Ohio. There they found a set of harness that Page had stolen from the destroyed barn, and he was caught almost red-handed. In the Michigan courtroom he was an object of pity. Some investigation had been made, and it was known that the captured man was but one of a gang of many more.

"Page, you tell us about your companions, and you will be allowed to go free," the judge informed him.

"Oh, you want me to either turn state's evidence and get free that way, or take my medicine if I just confess my own crime and keep my face closed about the others," was the quick retort.

"That's it exactly," the judge said. "I'll take my medicine," Page said, and he took it, for three years behind the prison doors of the Michigan penitentiary.

When the convict was finally released, and he returned to his Ohio pals, he was rudely shocked. Instead of being received with open arms, he was made the object of scorn and contempt.

"Why," Page said, "I could have sent all of you to h—, but I kept my tongue and none of you was pinched."

"Put the dog out of the way, he is ex-

cess baggage," Morrison said, and Page never forgot the insult. He left with the parting admonition that he would some day get even, and he has, for Morrison is serving in the penitentiary, and a score of his cronies have been indicted, a dozen found guilty and sent to prison, while Page breathes free air, and will probably live the rest of his days outside of prison walls.

The barriers in the way of a confession by Page were broken by Jim Saunders, a respected West Unity man. Saunders and Page were boys together, when they left England, the country of their birth, to try their fortunes in America. Saunders grew up in the straight and narrow path, living as he had been taught to live. Page forgot the good teachings of his youth. The officers got the two men together, Saunders well posted as to his duty. He resolved to do all he could to assist in wringing a confession from the old firebug. But this at first seemed to be useless, for Page, wary to the last, evaded the efforts to get at the truth.

Arrest of Page was finally necessary, and he was taken to Toledo, where the sweatbox was to be tried on him. Saunders accompanied him. The good man denounced the firebugs, talked of the days of long ago, when both stood on the threshold, with an even chance at the world. They had reached nearly the allotted three score and ten. The one was an honest man; the other was a criminal of the worst type. A few rounds of drinks in the Widdell hotel brought out admissions from Page. Then he confessed to some of his actions and asked Saunders' advice.

"Tell the whole truth, you can't afford to lie, now, Jack," said Saunders, and Page, seeing an opportunity to make good the threat of vengeance upon his former pals, disclosed so much that a conference with the fire marshal was arranged.

A man, conscious of the fact that his criminal operations are even partially known to those in authority, and wishing to bring upon his partners in crime the punishment he had already suffered, is easy picking for detectives. Thus it was that Page, the stoic, revealed the inner workings of the gang which had terrorized the community for years. Names were mentioned, and when the disclosures were substantiated by further investigation, the grand juries of Williams and Fulton counties were kept busy for months, indicting men connected with the conspiracy.

Number of Fires Unknown.

Nobody knows how many fires were caused by the torches of these criminals. The number is more than a hundred, but more accurate count than that has not



SHERIFF W. B. AMES.

Williams County, Ohio, Officer Who Arrested George Letcher, Alleged Incendiary, Now on Trial.

been kept. The insurance companies have paid, it is estimated, more than \$1,500,000 to the members of the gang.

Homer Morrison and Jack Page were indicted nearly a dozen times, principally for arson. April 2, 1878, they burned Morrison's home, and got the insurance. Morrison hired Page for that job. A little later, Page was duped into burning John Keller's property, west of West Unity. Then Keller, trapped because he employed Morrison to do the dirty work, was forced into the gang, and he became one of the worst of the lot. He was indicted several times for aiding Morrison and Page. October 13, 1903, he pleaded guilty to arson, and served a year in the penitentiary.

Waldo Ely, Morrison, Wesley Shipman and Frank Colon, all of whom participated in the attempt on Samuel Ayers' life, were indicted. Morrison got ten years in the penitentiary, Shipman two, and Ely one.

In 1895, new men were taken into the fold, and their work resulted in the indictment of Harry Kirkendall, William Bohner, Freddie Bowman, Charles Smith, William Davidson, and a half dozen others. Most of them confessed, and were given sentences ranging from one to four years in prison. William Matthews was another of the later day criminals. He was sentenced to serve two years. Newton Omev, Jackson Swisher, Charles Hultberg and one or two more are still at large, having fled from the state. They have remained away, fearing to take the consequences of their actions.

Even with the excellent work already accomplished, the state believes it has not done its full duty. More prominent men are to be dragged from their high pinnacle in society, and their work of the past exposed to the public view. Some have ceased to be active participants in the saturnalia of crime, and are leading respectable existences. But their reformation will not carry them through the present storm of justice. They must answer for their misdeeds, and the confessions, being made almost daily, will cause their downfall, and none but their disgraced families can enjoy the fruit of their ill gotten wealth.



WILLIAMS COUNTY COURTHOUSE.

It is in This Building at Bryan, O., That the Firebugs Are Being Tried.

firebugs, was a young man, possessed of a valuable farm and surrounded by friends who wished him only prosperity. Homer Morrison, also young and well-to-do, was his neighbor. Whatever induced these two boys to leave the Puritanic path laid out for them by Christian parents cannot be explained, except in their greed for gold. But the desire to defraud came, and 25 years elapsed before it was satisfied. Gathering as clansmen apparently honest and respectable farmers, the gang pursued its course, stopping at nothing, making insurance companies its prey, and pouncing upon them every time an occasion presented itself.

Working as honored men by day, they became the vilest desperadoes by

neighbor for fear that he would thus address a member of the organization and so jeopardize, not only his property, but the lives of himself and family. So high in social standing were the criminals that their identity was unknown, except in the inner circle. Once a building was fired, he who applied the flames was covered with the garb of good citizenship, and even the bravest feared to point at him the finger of suspicion, for such meant speedy revenge. A remark by one boasting farmer resulted in the burning of his barn the same night.

Task of State Officers.

To hunt down such a lot of beings was the task of state officers. The undertaking was known to be big and fraught with peril. Evidence was col-